

REMARKS

This Preliminary Amendment cancels original claims 1 to 10 in the underlying PCT Application No. PCT/DE03/02916 and adds new claims 11 to 23. The new claims conform the claims to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office rules and do not add new matter to the application.

In accordance with 37 C.F.R. § 1.125, the Substitute Specification (including the Abstract, but without the claims) contains no new matter. The amendments reflected in the Substitute Specification (including the Title and Abstract) are to conform the Specification and Abstract to U.S. Patent and Trademark Office rules or to correct informalities. As required by 37 C.F.R. § 1.121 and § 1.125, a Marked Up Version Of The Substitute Specification comparing the Specification of record and the Substitute Specification also accompanies this Preliminary Amendment. In the Marked Up Version, underlining indicates added text and "strike-throughs" and double-brackets indicate deleted text. Approval and entry of the Substitute Specification (including Abstract) are respectfully requested.

Also enclosed is a translated copy of the International Search Report dated January 27, 2004. The Search Report includes a list of documents that were considered by the Examiner in the underlying PCT application.

It is asserted that the subject matter of the present application is new, non-obvious, and useful. Prompt consideration and allowance of the application are respectfully requested.

Respectfully Submitted,
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ELECTRIC CONTACT

~~Background Information~~ FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The exemplary embodiment of the present invention is directed to an electric contact, in particular an electric contact of a plug-in connector, ~~of the type defined in more detail in the preamble of Claim 1.~~

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

An electric contact of this type is ~~known in practice~~ available and is used, for example, in the automobile industry.

Such an electric contact includes a metallic substrate, which is normally made of a copper-based alloy such as CuSn₄ bronze, CuNiSi or the like, on which a contact layer made of tin is situated. The contact layer may be a hot-tin-plated or electrolytically deposited layer which has a thickness of a few micrometers. An intermediary layer made of intermetallic compounds such as CuSn₄, Cu₅Sn₆ is formed by diffusion on the boundary surface with the substrate when a tin contact layer is used. The intermediary layer is harder than the contact layer and may grow as a function of the temperature.

Tin or a tin alloy is characterized by high ductility and good electric conductivity. Tin alloys or tin layers, however, have the disadvantage that they tend to wear off due to their low hardness and the resulting low wear resistance upon frequent insertions or vibrations caused by the vehicle or the engine, which results in increased oxidation, known as friction corrosion. Friction wear and/or friction corrosion may in turn result in failure of an electric automobile component associated with the contact in question, in particular a sensor, a control unit, or the like.

In tin or tin alloy layers of this type it is furthermore disadvantageous that the insertion forces for many applications are excessively high, because these contact layers have a strong tendency toward adhesion and high plastic deformability.

Furthermore, a tin-based contact layer of an electric contact, known as thermotin, is known in industry, which is made entirely of intermetallic phases and is manufactured by artificial aging. However, it has been found that thermotin has limited applicability, which may be shown in particular on the basis of chemical and abrasion testing.

Furthermore, Au-Co alloys on a nickel layer, silver plating on a copper or nickel layer, or gold plating were previously often used as contact layers in electric contacts.

In particular, silver-based, but also tin surfaces or contact layers tend toward cold fusion due to adhesion and are characterized by high friction coefficients in self-mated pairs.

Even in silver or gold layers previously used in electric contacts, oxidative wear of the substrate or of an intermediary layer used as an adhesion layer, often made of copper or nickel, may occur in the event of friction wear or flaking of the layer.

~~Advantages of the Invention~~

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The electric contact according to the exemplary embodiment of the present invention, having a metallic substrate to which a structured contact layer is applied, has the advantage of an optimized tribological characteristic, which is adjustable via structuring. In particular, a contact layer of an electric contact having reduced friction coefficients and increased wear resistance may be manufactured via suitable structuring.

As usual, the contact layer of the electric contact according to the present invention has a layer thickness of between 1 μm and 6 μm . Structuring is ~~is preferably~~may be in the range between 1 nm and 1 μm , which qualifies it as nanostructuring.

- 5 The substrate of the electric contact according to the present invention may be a substrate normally used in the automobile industry for plug-in connectors, for example, a copper-based alloy such as CuSn_4 bronze, CuNiSi , or the like. Alternatively, a substrate made of a nickel-based alloy may also be used.
- 10 According to a ~~special~~an exemplary embodiment of the electric contact according to the present invention, the structuring features particles between approximately 1 nm and 1 μm distributed, i.e., dispersed, in a matrix of the contact layer. A solid-state dispersion or nanodispersion is thus
- 15 created. The nanodispersion may be produced by an electrolytic method. The particles may be dispersed in the crystalline or amorphous matrix in a crystalline or amorphous form.

- The particle size of the particles dispersed in the matrix, whose proportion in the matrix is ~~is preferably~~may be between 1 vol.% and 50 vol.%, is advantageously in the range of 20 nm to 200 nm. Such particle sizes have been found ideal regarding their electrical and mechanical properties in 1 μm to 6 μm thick contact layers.
- 20

- By introducing the nanodispersion into the contact layer
- 25 matrix, the service life, in particular the number of insertion cycles and/or the friction corrosion resistance of the electric contact, may be increased.

- The strength and hardness of the contact layer may thus be increased by introducing particles whose hardness is greater
- 30 than that of the matrix. Particles of this type are made, for example, of Al_2O_3 which are dispersed in a matrix of tin or silver, for example. Alternatively, particles of yttrium oxide, zirconium oxide, titanium aluminide, titanium nitride, ruthenium alloy phases and/or the like may also be used.
- 35 Introducing electrically conductive phases such as titanium

nitride or ruthenium alloy phases as the particles dispersed in the matrix has the advantage that the electrical properties of the contact layer are not affected.

5 However, particles dispersed in the matrix, a silver matrix in particular, may also be formed by a solid-state lubricant. A solid-state lubricant of this type may be, for example, graphite or MoS_2 , and results in reduced friction forces and insertion forces which must be applied to connect the electric contact with a mating contact.

10 In ~~an alternative~~ another exemplary embodiment of the electric contact according to the present invention, the dispersed particles are micro-oil capsules.

The micro-oil capsules, which represent lubricant capsules of a microscopic size and may be introduced into the matrix using
15 an electrolytic process, ~~preferably~~ may contain a tribologically active lubricant containing antioxidants and/or antiadhesive additives and are wrapped in a polymer skin, for example. The antioxidants and antiadhesive additives are released in the case of such a contact where the highest
20 surface stresses occur on insertion or for micromovements due to vibrations. The polymer skins which wrap the oil capsules melt under the effect of a brief exposure to heat, for example, in the event of an increase in temperature to approximately 100°C to 200°C , for example.

25 Homogeneous distribution of the micro-oil capsules in the matrix may be achieved using ultrasound-generated turbulence or other hydraulic measures.

Alternatively, oil capsules or oil cavities may be introduced by melting a hot-tin-plated surface in an oil bath or by an
30 electrolytic method. In this case, the oil capsules have no polymer skin.

The micro-oil capsules introduced into the matrix represent carbon-containing islands in the structure and cause the friction forces and insertion forces to be optimized, increase

the service life of the layer and the friction corrosion resistance.

In an ~~advantageous~~exemplary embodiment of the present invention, tin or silver may be used as a matrix for the
5 micro-oil capsules.

In another embodiment of the electric contact according to the present invention, structuring is formed by a multilayer system which is made up of successive layers having varying chemical compositions. The friction coefficients of the
10 contact layer may be reduced and its wear resistance increased also by using such a multilayer system.

For example, the multilayer system may be a contact layer manufactured on the basis of gold or silver, such as a gold/cobalt layer system or a silver/indium layer system. Each
15 of the individual layers of the multilayer system is made of an alloy of these elements, for example, the proportion of the individual elements varying from layer to layer. It is also conceivable to select a gold/silver layer system as the contact layer, the proportion of gold and silver varying from
20 layer to layer. The layer sequence may be ABABA..., for example.

To improve the contact between the electric contact and its mating contact, the contact layer may have a noble metal cover layer, at least in some areas. The noble metal cover layer
25 ~~preferably has~~may have a thickness of between 0.1 μm and 0.3 μm , thus representing a "flash" layer. Ruthenium, gold, platinum, and/or palladium in particular are suitable as noble metals for the flash layer.

The contact layer of the electric contact according to the present invention ~~is preferably~~may be manufactured using an electrolytic method.
30

Further advantages and advantageous refinements of the object according to the present invention are ~~presented in the~~

~~description, the drawing, and the patent claims~~described herein and/or by the drawings.

Drawing

~~Four exemplary embodiments of the electric contact according to the present invention are schematically illustrated in the drawing and explained in greater detail in the subsequent description.~~

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

~~Fig. 1~~ Figure 1 shows a section of a first embodiment of an electric contact₁₀.

~~Fig. 2~~ Figure 2 shows a section of a second embodiment of an electric contact₁₀.

~~Fig. 3~~ Figure 3 shows a section of a third embodiment of an electric contact₁₀ and₁₁.

~~Fig. 4~~ Figure 4 shows a section of a fourth embodiment of an electric contact.

~~Description of the Exemplary Embodiments~~

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Figure 1 schematically illustrates a surface of an electric contact 10, which is a contact of a plug-in connector for use in an automobile.

Electric contact 10 includes a substrate 11 which is manufactured from a copper-based alloy such as CuSn₄, CuNi₂Si or the like. Substrate 11 has a thickness of between 0.1 mm and 0.5 mm.

A contact layer 12 is applied to substrate 11 by an electrolytic method. Contact layer 12 has a layer thickness of between approximately 1 μ m and 3 μ m and has a matrix 13 made

of tin. Hard particles 14 of aluminum oxide Al_2O_3 having a particle size of between 20 nm and 200 nm are distributed, i.e., "dispersed," in matrix 13. Contact layer 12 thus represents a solid-state nanodispersion.

- 5 Figure 2 schematically illustrates an electric contact 20, which is also a contact of a plug-in connector for use in an automobile.

Similar to the electric contact of Figure 1, electric contact 20 includes a substrate 11 which is made of a copper-based
10 alloy.

Substrate 11 of electric contact 20 is provided with a contact layer 22, which has a matrix 23 of silver. Graphite particles 24, known as graphite flakes, are homogeneously distributed in silver matrix 23. Graphite flakes 24 are used as a solid-state
15 lubricant and have a particle size of between 1 μm and 1 nm. The graphite flakes may be present in a platelet form and may have a length/thickness ratio of approximately 2 to 50 and/or have any other shape, for example, a spherical shape.

- Figure 3 illustrates an electric contact 30, which is also a
20 contact of a plug-in connector for use in an automobile.

Similar to the electric contact of Figure 1, electric contact 30 includes a substrate 11 which is made of a copper-based alloy. However, substrate 11 of electric contact 30 is provided in this case with a contact layer 32, which has a
25 matrix 33 of silver, in which oil capsules 34 are distributed, i.e., dispersed. The diameter of oil capsules 34 is less than 1 μm , i.e., it is in the sub-micrometer range. The oil capsules contain a tribologically active lubricant having antioxidants and antiadhesive additives, as well as a polymer
30 skin, which melts even upon brief exposure to heat. Lubricant capsules 34 allow the friction/insertion forces occurring when electric contact 20 is connected to a mating contact to be reduced.

Figure 4 illustrates an electric contact 40, which is also a contact of a plug-in connector for use in an automobile.

In electric contact 40, a multilayer system 42 is situated on a substrate 11, which corresponds to the substrates in the exemplary embodiments according to Figures 1 through 3 and is thus made of a copper-based alloy and is composed of a plurality of layers whose thickness is in the nanometer range. The individual layers differ through their chemical compositions and represent a silver/indium alloy, in which the proportion of silver and indium varies from layer to layer. Layer system 42 has a layer sequence ABAB... here, where A and B stand for a silver/indium alloy having a defined composition.

In this embodiment, a flash layer 43 made of ruthenium or gold, designed as a cover layer, is situated on the top of contact layer 42. Cover layer 43 ~~preferably has~~may have a thickness of approximately 0.1 μm .

~~Abstract~~ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE

An electric contact, in particular an electric contact of a plug-in connector, has a metallic substrate ~~(11)~~ to which a contact layer ~~(22)~~ is applied. The contact layer ~~(22)~~ is
5 ~~designed~~arranged as a structured layer ~~(Figure 2)~~.

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